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ABSTRACT

Recent reserach has attempted to determine systematically how attitudes influence behavior. This research examined whether access to attitude-relevant beliefs and prior experiences would mediate the relation between attitudes and behavior. Subjects were 49 college students with a mean age of 27 who did not live with their parents or in dormitories. Subjects' opinions toward preservation of the environment and their recall of preservation-related beliefs and experiences were assessed during the first experimental session. Approximately two weeks later, subjects were contacted at home by a different experimenter and were asked to sign and circulate proenvironment petitions and to participate in a recycling project. Subjects' responses to the petition request and the number of weeks they recycled were assessed. The results indicated that both favorability toward the environment and access to attitude-relevant information were important predictors of behavior. The exact nature of the relation between these predictors and behavior was apparent in the subsample of subjects who agreed to recycle: subjects with relatively high levels of access were likely to act in a manner consistent with their opinions; those in favor of preservation recycled, signed, and agreed to circulate the petitions, whereas those less favorable toward preservation were not as likely to do so. Subjects with relatively little access appeared to base their actions on factors other than their opinions. (Author/NRB)

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Access to Attitude-Relevant Information in Memory as a Determinant of Attitude-Behavior Consistency

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Running Head: ATTITUDE-BEHAVIOR CONSISTENCY

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Abstract

This research examined whether access to attitude-relevant beliefs and prior experiences mediates the relation between attitudes and behavior. Subjects' opinions toward preservation of the environment and their recall of preservation-related beliefs and experiences were assessed during the first experimental session. Approximately two weeks later, subjects were contacted at home and asked to sign and circulate proenvironment petitions and were asked to participate in a recycling project. Subjects' responses to the petition request and the number of weeks they recycled were assessed. Both favorability toward the environment and access to attitude-relevant information were important predictors of behavior. The exact nature of the relation between these predictors and behavior was apparent in the subsample of subjects who agreed to recycle: Subjects with relatively high levels of access were likely to act in a manner consistent with their opinions; those in favor of preservation recycled, signed, and agreed to circulate the petitions, whereas those less favorable were not as likely to do so. Subjects with relatively little access appeared to base their actions on factors other than their opinions.

Access to Attitude-Relevant Information in Memory as a Determinant of Attitude-Behavior Consistency

It has long been argued that attitudes exert a "directive or dynamic influence" on behavior (Allport, 1935) but systematic attempts to identify exactly how attitudes guide or influence actions are relatively recent. One of the most popular approaches to this question, derived from a cognitive framework, examines the accessibility or salience of attitudes in memory when one is confronted with the attitude object. Research in this area has focused on the situational and dispositional factors believed to increase subjects' awareness of their own opinions during attitude and behavior expression. Such awareness is thought to enhance attitude-behavior consistency (Abelson, 1982).

Increases in one's awareness of internal states have been linked to a variety of situational factors. For example, placing people in a "thinking person's environment," in which they are given time for directed thought about their attitudes before attitude or behavior expression, apparently activates the attitude in memory and thus increases attitude-behavior correspondence relative to settings in which people are not encouraged to reflect on their attitudes (Snyder & Kendzierski, 1982; Snyder & Swann, 1976). Also, reminding people that their attitudes have implications for a particular behavioral choice has been found to increase attitude-behavior consistency, at least when the attitude-consistent action doesn't conflict with subjects' personal interests (Borgida & Campbell, 1982). In addition, more subtle factors, such as exposure to one's mirror image, tape-recorded voice, or a camera, may enhance attention to the self and consequently increase attention to opinions and beliefs (Wicklund, 1982). Using this approach, high

attitude-behavior correlations appear to result from measuring the attitude or the behavior and then measuring the other component during exposure to the mirror, tape recording, or camera.

A somewhat different approach to the accessibility issue has been taken by researchers focusing on past experiences which give rise to chronically accessible attitudes. Fazio and his colleagues (Fazio, Chen, McDonel, & Sherman, 1982; Fazio, Herr, & Olney, 1984; Fazio, Powell, & Herr, 1983; Powell & Fazio, 1984) have argued that direct experience with an attitude object enhances the link in memory between the object and one's evaluation of it. Strong object-evaluation associations increase the likelihood that the attitude will be accessed upon encountering the object. An accessible attitude then guides people's perceptions of the attitude object and contextual cues, and it is these perceptions that appear to influence the behavioral response. In contrast, when one has had only indirect experience with the attitude object, object-evaluation associations are thought to be weak, attitudes are relatively inaccessible, and the resultant effect of the attitude on perceptions and behavior is relatively small. In one of the most direct tests of this approach (Fazio et al., 1982, Study 4), the strength of the object-evaluation link was enhanced for some subjects and, as would be expected, attitude-behavior correspondence increased in comparison to subjects with apparently weaker object-evaluation links. Since a prior study had found that strong object-evaluation ties are associated with high levels of attitude accessibility (Fazio et al., 1982, Study 3), the increased attitude-behavior correspondence was attributed to enhanced access.

In sum, a number of researchers have suggested that extent of accessibility

affects attitude-behavior relations. Since most research has not measured accessibility directly, there is presently only indirect empirical support for this analysis. A major exception is the model of attitude-behavior relations developed by Fazio and his colleagues (e.g., Fazio et al., 1982; Powell & Fazio, 1984). Although this research has obtained support for certain relations in the proposed model (e.g., amount of prior experience and strength of object-evaluation link, strength of object-evaluation link and attitude accessibility), no single study that we could locate directly assessed both individual differences in accessibility and consequent attitude-behavior consistency. Further, much of the research on cognitive approaches to attitude-behavior correspondence has been conducted in lab settings with potentially unimportant attitude objects such as experimental games. It would be desirable to extend this research to more naturalistic settings and to attitude topics with implications for subjects' daily lives.

The Present Research

The present work was designed to examine whether high levels of accessibility enhance attitude-behavior relations, and further to explore this issue in a field setting using a direct assessment of behavior. To accomplish this, we first evaluated subjects' attitudes toward preservation of the environment and their retrieval of preservation-related beliefs and experiences. Then we measured the extent to which they engaged in behavior relevant to environmental concerns. Similar to Weigel and Newman (1976), we evaluated whether subjects signed and circulated environmental petitions and whether they recycled bottles, aluminum cans, and other metal over a several week period.

To measure access to beliefs, subjects were given two minutes to list

characteristics and attributes of preservation. Access to prior experiences was measured by the extent to which they could list relevant prior actions. The time limit restricted subjects to indicating only easily accessible beliefs and behaviors and not the extent of their knowledge concerning preservation. This measure differs from such commonly used accessibility measures as reaction time to rate favorability toward attitude statements (cf. Fazio et al., 1982). Since subjects' recall lists can include attitude statements as well as attitude-relevant information, the present measure may assess ease of recall for both the attitude inference and the information on which this inference is based (cf. Loken, 1984; Wyer, Srull, & Gordon, 1984).

Subjects with high levels of access to beliefs and prior experiences have been found to rely on this internal information when evaluating new data such as a persuasive message or a recently performed behavior. In contrast, those with little assess do not appear to draw effectively on prior experiences and beliefs when formulating their opinions and instead appear to rely on currently available cues. Consequently, new information has less impact on the opinions of subjects with high (vs. low) levels of access (Wood, 1982; Wood, Kallgren, & Preisler, 1985). Further, high levels of access may confer the ability or the motivation to critically evaluate the content of a message. High access recipients appear to base their opinions on an assessment of the validity of message content whereas those with less access appear more likely to rely on simple heuristics (Chaiken, 1980), such as "long messages are valid" (Wood, Kallgren, & Preisler, 1985) or "likable communicators are credible" (Wood & Kallgren, 1985).

In the present study, subjects with high levels of access were expected to

find attitude-relevant information salient in memory when confronted with the attitude object. The accessible beliefs and prior experiences should provide a constant, stable source of information from which to derive attitudes and to initiate behavior, resulting in enhanced attitude-behavior consistency (cf. Ostrom, 1984). It was anticipated that subjects with high levels of access would demonstrate strong attitude-behavior consistency whereas those with less access would demonstrate little consistency between attitudes and actions. This hypothesis would be supported by a significant interaction between subjects' accessibility and their attitudes in the prediction of behavior; attitudes and behavior should be closely related for high accessibility individuals but have little relation for low accessibility ones.

Method

Subjects

Sixteen male and 33 female undergraduate psychology students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee participated in 1983 for extra course credit. Only students with listed telephone numbers who did not live with their parents or in the university dormitories were eligible. Because of this constraint, the mean age for the sample was 27.18. An additional four subjects were not included in the analysis, one due to experimenter error, another because she lived with her parents, a third figured out the connection between the recycling project and the experiment, and a fourth requested to be dropped.

Procedure

Session 1. Subjects reported individually to the laboratory for an attitude assessment study. They were told that several assessment techniques would be used in this study because "using a variety of assessment techniques

should induce you to think carefully about your opinions." Subjects first completed the belief and behavior retrieval measures for the critical topic, environmental preservation, and two additional issues, right to abortion and physical exercise (see below).

The subject was then seated in front of a monitor and asked to respond to attitude statements presented on the screen by an Apple II microcomputer. Subjects indicated their agreement with these statements by pressing one of nine keys labeled from "extremely unfavorable" (1) to "extremely favorable" (9). Subjects were first presented with six practice items. Then the attitude statements were presented: 18 concerned environmental preservation, 17 concerned abortion, and 17 concerned physical exercise. The order of the statements was randomized for each subject. Responses were recorded by the microcomputer.[2]

Finally, subjects provided background information about themselves, including sex, age, and membership in organizations related to environmental preservation.[3] Subjects were then given credit slips for participation and received a partial debriefing which claimed that the purpose of the study was to examine the relation between people's attitudes and the way they store attitude-relevant information in memory.

Session 2. Approximately two weeks after the first session, subjects were telephoned and asked to participate in a pilot recycling project. This project was purportedly independent of the initial experimental session. To maintain the illusion of independence, different experimenters were used for sessions 1 and 2. The experimenter for session 2 was unaware of subjects' responses in the first session.

Home visits were scheduled for all subjects willing to hear a description of the recycling project. If the subject indicated willingness to participate in the project during the home visit, he or she was instructed to place recyclable material (aluminum, other metal, and glass) near his or her garbage cans for pick-up on a specified day, once a week. A handout on the project which explained how to prepare recycables for pick-up was given to interested subjects. After the first scheduled pick-up all subjects who agreed to recycle were sent a letter reminding them of their respective pick-up day.

Also during the home visit, the subject was asked to sign two petitions; one called for the protection of endangered species and the other for the removal of James Watt as U.S. Secretary of the Interior. After agreeing or declining to sign either or both of the petitions, the subject was given the opportunity to circulate a copy of each petition for signatures from friends, family members, and others. Two stamped, pre-addressed envelopes were provided to return the petitions. Since only one subject returned the petitions prior to debriefing, subjects' intentions to circulate and return the petitions were scored instead of the actual return rate.

It should be noted that only subjects who expressed interest in recycling during the initial telephone contact were asked to sign and circulate petitions. This procedure resulted in no petition data for the twenty-five subjects refusing a home visit.

Final contact. Approximately three weeks after the second session, the subjects were contacted again by phone. The interviewer explained that she was calling participants from the attitude assessment study. Subjects were asked to describe the experiment "because it has been a while since you first

participated, and we would like to know what you thought the experiment was about." They were given as long as they needed to respond, and none made any allusion to attitude-behavior relations or to the recycling project.

Finally, subjects were fully debriefed and informed that because the recycling project was part of the experiment, it would be discontinued in one week. The final pick-up gave subjects a chance to recycle any material they might have collected since the most recent pick-up. Data from this final pick-up were not analyzed. Subjects were told that additional experimental credit had already been arranged with their psychology instructors. A follow-up letter reiterating the debriefing and a list of local recycling centers was sent to all subjects.

Measuring Instruments

Attitude assessment. The 18 specific attitude statements related to environmental preservation were initially selected from a pool of 28 statements. Forty pretest subjects rated their favorability toward each statement on a 9-point scale ranging from "extremely unfavorable" to "extremely favorable." Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha equaled .83 for the 18 items selected. Included in this group were items assessing attitude toward issues such as retaining James Watt as Secretary of the Interior and recycling at a recycling center. Consistent with the pretesting, Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha was .85 for the final sample of subjects.

To assess overall favorability toward the environment, an index was computed by taking the mean attitude rating for each subject across the 18 relevant statements.[4] Subjects' overall opinions on this measure were highly favorable (M = 7.34). For the analyses, the attitude index was transformed to a

standard score.

Accessibility of attitude-relevant beliefs and behaviors. The measure of accessibility of attitude-relevant information consisted of two tasks (cf. Wood, 1982; Wood et al., 1985). First, subjects listed the relevant facts and characteristics they believed to be true about preservation of the environment and two other topics, right to abortion and physical exercise. Next, the subjects listed the past behaviors they had engaged in related to the topics. Both of these tasks were completed with a time limit of two minutes for each issue. This restricted the subjects to listing only easily accessible beliefs and behaviors. The number of discrete beliefs and behaviors listed were coded by two independent raters (mean rs across topics = .98 and .99, for beliefs and behaviors, respectively). The number of preservation-related beliefs and behaviors listed were correlated, r (47) = .60, $p < .001$. Each measure was transformed to a standard score and these scores were summed to form a retrieval index for each of the three topics. The mean number of environmental beliefs and behaviors listed, in original units, was 5.86. Unlike prior work (Wood, 1982; Wood, et al., 1985), environmental attitudes correlated significantly with environmental retrieval, r (47) = .38, $p < .05$. To control for this relation, subjects were divided into three groups representing low, medium, and high accessibility. The three-way split was calculated separately for subjects with opinions at each point along the original nine-point attitude scale.

Behavior Measures

Each of the three weeks that a subject left material to be recycled was coded 1. Recycling scores for the recycling behavior criterion ranged from 0 to 3.

For each petition, signing was coded 1, and not signing coded 0. Similarly, agreeing to circulate a petition was coded 1 and not agreeing to circulate was coded 0. Petition scores for the two topics combined (endangered species and James Watt) ranged from 0 to 4.

A composite behavioral index was formed by adding together subjects' standardized scores on recycling and petitioning. Before standardization this index ranged from 0 to 7, and had a mean of 2.10.

Results

The distribution of the behavioral index representing subjects' scores on both recycling and petitioning was positively skewed because approximately half of the subjects did not agree to recycle (n = 25). A large percent of the sample, then, received a score of 0. Because of this non-normal distribution, a logistic regression procedure was employed in the analysis (Aldrich & Nelson, 1984).[6] The logistic regression revealed that attitude was a significant predictor of behavior (B = 0.76, p < .05). The R statistic, which is similar to a multiple correlation coefficient, for the attitude predictor was .15. Retrieval was also a predictor of behavior (B = -0.74, p < .05), R = .22. However, the interaction between retrieval and attitude was not significant (B = 0.38, ns).

These analyses on the total sample may not be sensitive enough to clearly depict the mediating role of accessibility. The subjects who did not agree to listen to a description of the recycling program were not assessed on petitioning behavior. These people all received a score of 0, yet, since they might have agreed to sign and circulate petitions if this behavior had been assessed, their true scores probably ranged from 0 to 4. The clearest test of

the present hypotheses can be conducted on the subsample of subjects who allowed the experimenter to visit them at home and describe the recycling project (n = 24), since all of these subjects were assessed on both recycling and petitioning. The behavioral index for this group had a mean of 4.17 and ranged from 0 to 7.

The subsample who agreedto recycle did not differ in any identifiable way from the sample who refused, except for agreement to recycle. On the overall opinion measure the subsample who agreed (M = 7.49, SD = 0.86) was not significantly different from the refusing subsample (M = 5.50, SD = 2.59). Also, on the retrieval measure the agreeing subjects were not significantly different from the ones who refused (M = 6.20, SD = 2.12).

Hierarchical regression analysis was employed to examine the relation among retrieval of beliefs and experiences, attitudes, and behavior. Attitudes alone significantly predicted behavior (B = .60, p < .01), R = .60. The addition of retrieval to this equation (B = -.19, p < .05) did not improve the prediction of behavior, R = .63, p < . 001, and R^2 change = .04. The addition of the interaction between attitude and retrieval (B = 0.92, p < .05) did significantly improve prediction, R = .74, p < .001 and R^2 change = .16.

Following a procedure suggested by Cohen and Cohen (1983, p. 323), the interaction was evaluated by examining the relation between attitude and behavior for varying levels of accessibility. The best fitting regression line for subjects with relatively low levels of retrieval, that is for those with accessibility scores at least one standard deviation below the mean (3.50 or less), had a slope of .19, indicating that attitude had little impact on behavior. The regression line drawn for subjects with opinions at the mean (M =

5.86) had a slope of .52, and the slope for subjects with accessibility scores at least one standard deviation above the mean (8.22 or more) was .84, indicating that attitudes had a relatively strong impact on behavior in this subgroup. Thus as predicted, the relation between attitudes and behaviors depended on subjects' extent of retrieval.

It is important to note that the relation between environmental attitudes, retrieval, and behavior is issue-specific. Thus, extent of retrieval on topics unrelated to preservation, such as abortion or physical exercise, did not significantly enhance the prediction of environmental behaviors beyond that provided by environmental opinions alone. For the subsample who agreed to recycle, abortion retrieval and exercise retrieval were not significant predictors ($\underline{R}^2$ change = .00 and .03, respectively, ns) and neither were the interactions between abortion or exercise retrieval and environmental attitudes ($\underline{R}^2$ change = .07 and .00, respectively, ns).[7]

Discussion

This research demonstrated that attitudes can be important predictors of behavior. Attitudes alone accounted for over 35 percent of the variance in actions. This finding is noteworthy in that it was obtained with a relatively important attitude topic, preservation of the environment, and further was observed in a field setting with actions, recycling and petition signing, performed by people in their everyday lives.

Further, for the subsample of subjects who agreed to recycle, the interaction between attitude and accessibility was a significant predictor of behavior in addition to attitudes alone. Consistent with our hypotheses, the relation between attitudes and behavior was not constant across all levels of

accessibility. Specifically, attitudes and behavior were strongly related for subjects with relatively high levels of accessibility and, to a lesser extent, for subjects with moderate levels of accessibility. For these subjects, highly favorable attitudes were associated with agreeing to sign and circulate the proenvironment petitions and with recycling. Subjects with less favorable opinions engaged in relatively few propreservation actions. In contrast, for subjects with relatively low levels of accessibility, attitudes and actions were not closely related. These subjects apparently did not use their opinions as a guide to performing or not performing proenvironment behaviors.

The significant interaction between attitude and accessibility was only found with the subsample of 24 subjects who initially agreed to recycle. The behavioral measure on the total sample did not include actual recycling or petition signing data for half the subjects, it was based solely on stated agreement to listen to an appeal to recycle. Apparently this measure was not sensitive enough to reveal the exact nature of the relation between attitudes and accessibility. It is important to note that the subsample who agreed to recycle did not differ in any identifiable way from the sample who refused, except for agreement to recycle. The subsample who agreed was not significantly different from the one who refused on favorability of opinion or on extent of retrieval.

Although this research successfully demonstrated that people with access to attitude-relevant beliefs and prior experiences are more likely to use their attitudes to guide their behavior than those with little access, the study does not identify whether accessibility directly affects attitude-behavior consistency. It is possible that the obtained attitude-behavior link is a

function of some additional variable, such as subjects' involvement in the topic (Sherif & Hovland, 1961). This idea is plausible since prior work (Wood, 1982) found involvement to be positively related to amount of access. However, since direct measures of ego involvement have not found that it consistently moderates attitude-behavior relations (Sivacek & Crano, 1982), involvement alone does not appear to adequately account for the present findings.

It is likely that other mediators of attitude-behavior consistency, such as one's vested interested in the attitude topic (Sivacek & Crano, 1982) or the amount of direct experience one has had with the topic (Fazio & Zanna, 1978) will typically covary with accessibility in predicting attitude-behavior relations. These other factors are likely to be implicated in attitude-behavior relations in part because they are linked to the more immediate, information-processing determinants of attitude-behavior consistency, which include accessibility of the attitude and attitude-relevant data (cf. Fazio & Zanna, 1981).

Prior work by Fazio and his colleagues (e.g., Fazio, Chen, McDonel, & Sherman, 1982; Powell & Fazio, 1984) provides insight into why high levels of accessibility improve attitude-behavior relations. Apparently accessible attitudes guide people's perceptions of the attitude object and contextual cues and it is these perceptions which influence behavior. In the present study it seems likely that high retrieval subjects viewed the opportunity to recycle or sign petitions as a chance to engage in pro- or antipreservation activities whereas those with lower access may have believed that these actions had other implications, such as a chance to engage in community projects, to impress the neighbors, or to please the interviewer.

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Footnotes

1. Under some conditions, it appears that accessibility alone will not determine whether attitudes form the basis for actions. As Snyder and Kendzierski (1982) found, the attitude must not only be accessible but also must be perceived as relevant to the behavior. In the present study we chose attitudes and behaviors that prior research had found to correspond (Weigel & Newman, 1976). This correspondence suggests that the attitude topic is generally considered to be relevant to the behavioral indices.
2. A procedural error precluded interpreting the data on subjects' reaction times to rate the attitude statements.
3. Only four subjects reported belonging to an environmental organization, thus this measure was dropped from the analysis.
4. During the first and third contacts subjects were also asked to indicate their opinions toward preservation of the environment on a 9-point scale ranging from "highly unfavorable" to "highly favorable." This attitude measure is not included in the text because, due to problems in administration, subjects did not appear to interpret the scale in a similar manner at both assessments, and consequently the measure proved to be highly unstable across the assessments, r (47) = .09, ns.
5. Two different experimenters were employed in Session 1. A Sex X Experimenter interaction was obtained in the analysis on environmental retrieval, $F(1,43) = 3.52$, $p < .05$. This interaction did not appear on other measures and did not compromise interpretation of the results reported in the text.
6. Several other methods of calculating the behavioral measure were employed.

First, the behavioral index was collapsed into three groups, representing scores of 0 (n = 24), 1 through 4 (n = 16), and 5 through 7 (n = 9). The results of a logistic regression analysis on this trichotomous index revealed first that favorable attitudes were associated with the behavioral measures of petition signing and recycling (B = .68, p < .05), R = .18. The addition of retrieval to this equation (B = -.50, ns), R = -.03, and the interaction between attitude and retrieval (B = .33, ns), R = .00, did not significantly improve prediction. The behavioral measure was also computed using just the recycling results. This index ranged from 0 to 4 and reflected whether subjects agreed to recycle as well as whether they recycled each of the 3 weeks of the study. A logistic regression on the index yielded results highly similar to the analysis on the recycling plus petitioning index. Only attitude was a significant predictor of behavior (B = 0.67, p < .05), R = .15. Retrieval (B = -.37, ns), R = .00, and the interaction between retrieval and attitude (B = .21, ns), R = .00, were not significant.

7. On the basis of prior work (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977; Weigel and Newman, 1976) it was anticipated that attitude-behavior correspondence would be greatest when the target of the attitude and behavior measures correspond. Overall favorability toward the environment should best predict multiple act criteria, which average across particular targets (e.g., James Watt and endangered species), whereas ratings of specific attitude statements (e.g., attitude toward James Watt) should best predict single-act criteria (e.g., signing a petition to remove Watt). Only partial support was obtained for this analysis. The effectiveness of the overall attitude measure was

assessed with the subsample of subjects who agreed to recycle, since the most precise behavioral data was available for this group. As would be anticipated, the single-act behavioral criteria did not, in general, relate to overall favorability toward the environment as highly as the composite index of behavior which aggregated across petitioning and recycling, mean $\underline{r}(22) = .37$ for single-act criteria vs. $\underline{r}(22) = .60$ for multiple-act criterion. The difference between these correlations, calculated separately for each of the single-act measures, was significant for the two petition signing measures ($\underline{ps} < .01$) but not for the three recycling measures. Contrary to expectations, however, the specific attitude statements were not more effective than overall favorability in predicting single-act behavioral criteria. For example, with the subsample of subjects who agreed to recycle, favorability toward recycling did not correlate with the aggregate recycling measure (recycling for weeks 1, 2, and 3 summed), $\underline{r} = (22) = .12$, ns, yet overall attitude correlated with this measure, $\underline{r}\ (22) = .64$, $\underline{p} < .01$. These two correlations were significantly different from each other, $\underline{t}(21) = 3.09$, $\underline{p} < .05$. Perhaps the lack of correspondence between specific attitudes and behaviors is due to the fact that the attitude measures we employed tended not to specify a particular action whereas the behavior measures did. In order for specific attitudes to predict specific behaviors, the measures may need to correspond on both targets and actions.

Author Notes

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